

## How Runaway and Homeless Youth Navigate Troubled Waters: Personal Strengths and Resources

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### **Abstract:**

Little attention has been paid to how runaway or homeless adolescents are able to make successful transitions into adulthood. This article reports on partial findings from an exploratory study of the research question, “How do formerly runaway and homeless adolescents navigate the troubled waters of leaving home, living in high-risk environments, and engaging in dangerous behaviors, to make successful developmental transitions into young adulthood?” This qualitative study involved interviews with 12 formerly runaway or homeless youth. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. This paper reports on findings related to the personal strengths and resources that enabled youth to make successful transitions: learning new attitudes and behaviors, personal attributes, and spirituality. Recommendations for program development and intervention with homeless or at-risk youth are discussed.

### **Article:**

Most adolescents experience some measure of personal and familial difficulties as they attempt to navigate the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Although adolescence is fraught with challenges for both adolescents and their families, most are able to weather these storms with relative success, maintaining the integrity of the family and family support for youth as they move into adulthood. However, some adolescents experience such difficult personal and/or familial circumstances that they see no recourse other than to run away from home or to otherwise leave their families before they have fully made the transition into adulthood.

Increasing numbers of runaway and homeless youth have become a serious social challenge to policy makers, human service providers, and communities. In 1988, the U. S. Department of Juvenile Justice estimated that between three-quarters and one and one half million adolescents were living on the streets at any one time (Zide & Cherry, 1992). In 1994, approximately 1.3 to 1.6 million young people were homeless each year (U. S. HUD, 1994), and in 1996, the U. S. Conference of Mayors (1996) found that 3% of the homeless population was comprised of unaccompanied minors. One child in 8 will run away prior to age 18, and 40% of them do not return to the same living situation they had before running away (Whitbeck & Simons, 1990). Many young people who run away or are otherwise homeless are either running from foster care placements or have been in foster care at some point in their lives. For example, the incidence of homelessness among former foster youth who participated in independent living programs prior to discharge from care has been estimated at between 25% (Cook, 1991) and 50% (Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999).

Zide and Cherry (1992) identified four primary reasons youth leave home prematurely: (1) to find excitement or adventure (running to); (2) to escape conflictual or dangerous family situations such as alcoholism, violence, or neglect (running from); (3) because they are alienated from their families who have often given up on them and because they are in trouble with school or law enforcement (thrown out); and (4) because their families can no longer financially support them (forsaken). Regardless of why they leave home, these adolescents are at risk for

substance abuse, delinquency, sexually transmitted diseases, and un-wanted pregnancy. They are also at high risk for various forms of victimization, including becoming objects of violence and becoming involved in prostitution (Whitbeck & Simons, 1990).

While a great deal is known about why runaway and homeless youth leave home, the hazards they face, and the lifestyles they lead, little is known about how some of these youth are able to resolve the challenges and problems they face to make successful transitions into adult-hood. Adolescent development is influenced not only by biological determinants, but also by the social and psychological context of their lives (Lerner, 1995). There is a rich body of knowledge concerning the development of white middle-class adolescents who make the transition to adulthood within the framework of family life (Burton, Allison, & Obeidallah, 1995). Developmental contextualism theory emphasizes the importance of understanding development within the unique context of adolescents' lives. Thus, we cannot assume that knowledge of what is considered to be normative adolescent development is directly applicable to runaway or homeless youth who leave seriously troubled family situations and live in high-risk environments.

The focus of this exploratory study was to identify and describe keys to successful transitions for adolescents who have run away or been homeless. The researchers adopted the metaphor of such youth as sailors on the sea of adolescence, made even more turbulent by troubled family situations and the challenge of making their way to a port of safety on their own in an often dangerous world. Thus, our primary research question was, "How do formerly runaway and homeless adolescents navigate the troubled waters of leaving home, living in high-risk environments, and engaging in dangerous behaviors, to make successful developmental transitions into young adulthood?"

## **Methodology**

We used a phenomenological approach to identify and richly describe how formerly runaway and/or homeless youth are able to navigate the troubled waters of their disrupted lives and achieve a measure of self-defined success. Specific research foci included: (1) the nature of decisive turning points in the lives of these young people; (2) the personal and contextual factors that enabled them to successfully resolve difficulties and achieve some level of self-defined success in young adult-hood; and (3) how they define success for themselves.

## **Data Collection**

Researchers conducted focus groups with 30 peer educators from run-away and youth shelters as an initial step in the development of the interview guide used in this study. These youth were asked about their ideas of success and how troubled youth are able to be successful despite the many crises in their lives. Group interviews were also conducted with 22 social service providers from youth shelters and programs regarding their perceptions of these same issues. Ideas from these focus groups were used to develop a semi-structured interview guide that was reviewed by service providers at two youth shelters and subsequently modified prior to beginning data collection. The interview guide was modified as data were collected and analyzed to reflect conceptual questions that emerged. The final version of the interview guide included the following major subject areas: demographic information; difficult times youth had experienced; how they had made it through those times; turning points in their lives; current situation; definition of success; and future hopes and plans.

All four members of the research team conducted interviews that were conversational in nature, generally lasting from 50 to 90 minutes each. The interviews were conducted in places convenient to research participants, including their homes, youth shelters, or group homes. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were paid \$30.00 each.

## **Sample**

Staff at shelters and group homes in two North Carolina cities and three Georgia towns identified research participants. Criteria for participation in the study were that participants be between the ages of 18–25 and that they had stayed in a youth shelter, group home, or other alternative living arrangement as an adolescent, but not within the past two years. Prior to the interviews, researchers reviewed the purpose of the study, verified that

participants were cooperating voluntarily, informed participants of their right to withdraw from participation at any time, and answered any questions participants had.

Of the 12 participants whose interviews are included in this study, 3 were male, 9 were female, 9 were Caucasian, and 3 were African-American. Six of the youth were from Georgia, and 6 were from North Carolina. They ranged in age from 18 to 25. Most of the youth had either graduated from high school or had completed a GED. Exceptions were one young man who was still a senior in high school, another young man who had been expelled at age 16, and a young woman who had dropped out of 10th grade the week before the interview. Three of the youth were in college, 1 had completed a vocational degree, 6 were working and not attending school, and 2 were neither employed nor in school. According to the Zide and Cherry (1992) typology, six of the youth were “running to,” two were “running from,” and four were “thrown out.” None of the youth fell into the “forsaken” category. Additional information is included in the Participant Profiles section below. All of the names by which youth are referred to in this paper are pseudonyms.

### *Data Analysis*

The constant comparative approach was used to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method involves analyzing data as it is collected, using preliminary findings to shape future interviews. The intent of this process is to build a conceptual framework that reflects participant experiences and perceptions regarding the research question. Although the research team had some preexisting ideas about what some of the participants’ experiences might be (as reflected in the subject areas of the interview guide), we deliberately avoided using those preexisting ideas as a beginning framework for analysis. Instead, we used open coding methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to discover the factors, ideas, and experiences that youth perceived to have been important in their lives.

All four researchers independently coded the first six interview transcripts to identify initial categories that seemed to encompass the experiences youth described. Next, all four researchers reanalyzed one of the transcripts using initial categories that emerged from open coding. The researchers then discussed coding to clarify definitions and enhance inter-coder reliability. Subsequently, each of the remaining 11 transcripts were coded by two team members using the initial categories. The team members worked closely together to continue the process of clarification and maintenance of inter-coder reliability. Additional categories were added and existing categories were modified as analysis proceeded.

A word about the process of category development is in order. The initial open coding process resulted in well over 30 factors that youth identified as having been important in their ability to move from homelessness and alienation to a self-defined sense of success. As researchers discussed and compared these various factors, they attempted to group them together into conceptual categories that would encompass several factors youth mentioned. Thus, the findings can be seen as a tree comprised of a trunk (representing the research question itself); major branches representing the major categories of findings; minor branches that are related to the major branches and that themselves are inclusive of leaves that represent specific factors youth related to success. In all instances, the most specific factors (the leaves) were cited by the re-search participants themselves and were not based on researcher interpretation. The words and phrases that name these subcategories are those of the participants. The researchers do take responsibility for the conceptualization process that resulted in the identification and naming of the higher level categories, although, in some instances, the participants themselves suggested those conceptualizations.

After the transcripts were analyzed, the NUDIST software program (Qualitative Solutions & Research, 1997) was used to code specific transcript segments to the conceptual categories that had emerged and to sort the data according to conceptual categories. The researchers then engaged in a third level of analysis as they proceeded to compare the segments that had been coded with each other and with the full set of conceptual categories. At the end of this analytic step, some modifications were made in the conceptual framework, resulting in the findings presented below.

## Participant Profiles

Terry (19, Caucasian) had dropped out of school in the 10th grade, but was working on her GED at the time of the interview. She had just got out of jail and had begun a new job at a grocery store. She was seriously dating someone and reported no children. Terry had started using alcohol and drugs and running away from home at age 14. For several years her living situation was very unstable as she moved back and forth between her mother and foster care, periodically running away to live on the streets, with friends, and with strangers. During this time she reported being raped. Recently, she had been arrested for being in a truck her current boyfriend had stolen and had spent one month in jail. At the time of the interview, she was living with her grandmother, going to school, and had been sober for 54 days.

Carrie (18, Caucasian) had completed the 9th grade, then obtained her GED. At the time of the interview she was not married and had no children. She was working at Walmart and hoped to become a cosmetologist in the future. At age 12, Carrie had broken into a house and been arrested and put on probation. Around age 14, she felt that she was overweight and began starving herself. The starving stopped when she got her first boyfriend. At age 15 she ran away from home and ended up in a local shelter for 2 weeks. She continued to visit the shelter for counseling and support after she returned home. At age 16 she was arrested for DUI, but her probation officer “stood up for [her] in court” and she was put on probation. She reported that her family had a long history of suicide and substance abuse, which makes her determined to stay away from alcohol and drugs.

Yvonne (17, Caucasian) had also completed the 9th grade, but had dropped out of school a week before the interview after learning she was pregnant by an older man. Yvonne had been in and out of foster care since age 8. She experienced multiple placements generally due to her disruptive behavior, including running away and kicking a 2- year-old she was babysitting. Yvonne had tried to commit suicide numerous times and experienced several hospitalizations. She had only recently been released from the custody of the child welfare department.

Wanda (18, African-American) had completed high school and was currently enrolled school and working. She hoped to get a college education in the future. She was not married but was in a committed relationship. Wanda had been placed foster care at age 3 or 4 and did not live with her birth family again until she moved in with her mother at age 16. She entered a shelter after running away or being “kicked out” (unclear) of her second foster home because she wanted more freedom and would not abide by the foster parent’s rules. She stayed in a shelter for 2 days then moved in with a teacher for a month before being placed in another foster home. She was especially proud of herself for having finished high school early, at age 16.

Mandy (20, Caucasian) had completed 10th grade, earned her GED, and was working for a newspaper. She was married to a man with two children, and she had a son of her own, age 3. At age 14 Mandy had begun dating an abusive boyfriend with whom she remained for several years. There were family conflicts because her mother didn’t like the boyfriend, and Mandy ended up living in a youth shelter. Three months after leaving the shelter she found she was pregnant and her boyfriend left her. At that point she returned to her mother who convinced her to have the baby rather than an abortion. She was arrested twice for DUI while pregnant, and her son was born with serious physical problems. About two years before the interview, the boyfriend (who had returned) broke up with her again, she met the man she would later marry, and she quit using drugs. Later she separated from her husband for 8 months, but then reunited. At the time of the interview she was committed to being a good mother to her son.

Andy (19, Caucasian) had dropped out of school in the 8th grade. He was married with 2 children who he cared for while his wife worked. At 15, Andy had spent two weeks at a “home for youth who run away or have other problems” because of school truancy. He was “kicked out” of school at age 16 for causing trouble at school. He developed a drinking problem, was arrested for DUI, lost his driver’s license, and was sent to jail for breaking and entering. The experience was so aversive to Andy that he quit drinking and stopped spending time with the “bad crowd” he had been with.

June (22, Caucasian) had graduated from high school and from a medical assistant vocational program. She was

working as a medical assistant in a doctor's office, and wanted to become a registered nurse. She was engaged and had no children. When June was 16, she had serious conflicts with her mother and refused to abide by her parents' rules. She dropped out of school and moved in with friends. When they could not pay the rent, she tried to return home, but her parents would not let her. At that point, she entered a youth shelter. June had also been arrested several times on charges she did not specify. She stated that she learned from these experiences, and her parents allowed her to come back home because she was "trying to make a change in [her] life." However, it was not until she met her fiancé that she stopped using marijuana, about a year before the interview.

Susan (20, Caucasian) was a high school graduate and had taken some community college courses. She wanted to get a college degree in elementary education, but at the time of the interview she was working in a bowling alley. She had recently found out she was pregnant, and the man she had been dating seemed to have disappeared from the scene. The father of a friend had raped Susan when she was 16, but she told no one for a month. Shortly after confiding in her mother, she attempted suicide and was hospitalized. Later that year she became pregnant and miscarried the child. She reported highly conflictual relationships with her parents during this period. After the miscarriage and "blowup" with her parents, she entered a youth shelter program for about 2 weeks. Through counseling provided by the program, she was able to return home where she was still living at the time of the interview.

Clark (18, African-American) was currently completing the 12th grade and planning to attend community college classes before transferring to a local university to study engineering. At age 15 Clark had been arrested and put on probation. One requirement of the probation was that he be committed to a youth shelter program for four months. After this one brush with the law, Clark said he learned he did not want to get into trouble again.

Kameka (21, African American) was currently a junior in college studying art education. She was seriously dating someone and reported no children. Kameka had become homeless when she was 15. After years of sexual abuse and neglect by her drug-addicted mother, she threatened to kill herself rather than return home. With the help of her school guidance counselor, she entered a psychiatric hospital and then a group home where she lived until she left for college.

Trisha (22, Caucasian) was a senior in college, studying psychology, working on campus, and hoping to go to graduate school in social work. She had recently discovered her sexual orientation as a lesbian and was currently dating someone. Trisha had been sexually abused from ages 7 to 9, which she believed led to her serious depression, substance addiction, and suicide attempts. She had been shuffled between her divorced parents' homes until her parents committed her to a psychiatric hospital at age 15. From there she went to a treatment center where she stayed for a year and a half, and then went to a group home for 6 months. She reported not having used substances since leaving the treatment center. She did not feel she could return home because of her mother's own addiction.

Drew (25, Caucasian) had dropped out of high school in the 10th grade, but had got his GED and completed one semester of technical college in a culinary program. He had been working for several years doing furniture delivery and refinishing. At age 14, Drew had been arrested for breaking and entering. "Things" were not good at home with his parents or at school, and he entered a youth shelter for about 11 months. He moved back home with his parents, but left to live with friends after a "couple of months" because he did not get along with his parents. At age 17, he ran into a tree while DUI, was seriously injured, and lost his driver's license. His friends took care of him because he was still out of contact with his parents. This incident served as a wake-up call to him because of the fear that he could have killed or seriously injured someone else. Subsequently he reestablished contact with his parents and went on to get his GED and secure stable employment.

## **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how formerly runaway and homeless youth are able to successfully navigate the troubled waters of their disrupted lives and make successful transitions into adulthood. Two major dimensions of successful navigation emerged from the participant interviews: 1) Personal Strengths and



Resources, and 2) Help Received From Others. A previous paper presented findings related to Help Received From Others (Kurtz, Jarvis, Lindsey, & Nackerud, in press). This article presents findings regarding the Personal Strengths and Resources young people believed made a difference in their lives. This dimension is comprised of three categories: Learning New Attitudes and Behaviors, Personal Attributes, and Spirituality.

### *Learning New Attitudes and Behaviors*

All 12 research participants reported that learning new attitudes and behaviors helped them deal more effectively with turning points and difficult times, although the nature of the attitudes and behaviors they learned varied. The concept of learning encompasses both what youth learned (attitudes and behaviors) and the process by which the learning took place (learning from one's own experiences and learning from the experiences of others). A new attitude is defined as a cognitive or affective shift that participants believed helped them through a difficult time; new behaviors refers to specific behavioral changes they perceived to be positive. Such behaviors often were associated with attitudinal changes, although some new behaviors seemed more related to actually learning new skills. The attitudes and behaviors youth perceived to be most important seemed to fall into 2 general categories: what they learned about themselves, and what they learned about being in relationship with other people.

### *Learning About Themselves*

Learning About Themselves encompassed such ideas as the development of self-confidence and self-love, and learning both the importance of taking care of oneself and how to do so. Discovering what goals were important to them was also an important aspect of learning about themselves.

Six youth indicated they had learned to have more self-confidence. For instance, Drew, who was severely injured in a car accident while driving drunk, said, "I don't know if it's just more confidence ... I feel like I'm coming into my own where I'm definitely comfortable with who I am." Mandy said, "If I can get through that [abuse from boyfriend], I can get through anything. I'm strong enough." June found that "within the last 4 or 5 years ... I trust myself more, but it's been a hard thing to learn how to do."

Four youth believed that learning to accept and love themselves was important to turning their lives around. Trisha said, "I like me more than I ever have.... That was also a big self-esteem thing in the past, and that's still a process." Terry also noted how her feelings toward herself changed as she struggled to quit using alcohol and drugs. She said, "I didn't care about myself. I cared about my drugs and my alcohol. I didn't care about anything else.... I have been sober for 54 days now. That's been hard ... I'm more at peace with myself. ..."

Carrie also learned to accept and love herself:

I never liked myself because every time I done something wrong.... I'd put myself down for it. Now I know that people are going to make mistakes, and everybody's entitled to their mistakes.... If it's something real bad then you just have to ask God for His forgiveness. So, I learned strongly that I did love myself.

Terry noted that self-love can prevent people from getting into trouble in the first place:

If you love yourself, you are not going to put yourself through the torment, the actual hell, that you would put yourself through if you were running away, living on the street, and doing drugs.... Because that is hurting yourself.... So, if you love yourself, why would you want to hurt yourself? That is a new perspective on life.

Five participants found that they had to learn to take care of them-selves. For Kameka, taking care of herself involved becoming more assertive with other people. She said, "After people take advantage of you, after they use you, after they talk about you,... there comes a point where you're going to have to ... or you break. I mean, you either let them run over you or you stand up for yourself." It was not easy for Kameka to learn to put her needs first because she had taken care of her younger brother since she was eight. She said, "I put people before

me for a long time, all my life basically. And it comes to a point in time when you just have to say, ‘No, I got to look out for me right now.’” To Clark, taking care of himself meant:

You got to do for yourself... cause sooner or later you’re going to have to. Somebody ain’t going to be there to get your back every single time you get in trouble or you need help. You got to do for yourself if you want to survive. It’s like Charles Darwin said, ‘The strong survive, survival of the fittest.’

Trisha, a recovering substance abuser, found that it was important to learn “how to care, take care of myself, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.” Sometimes that meant distancing herself from her mother who also has a substance abuse problem and is not in recovery. Trisha said that she cannot be with her mother unless she feels safe “because if there’s drinking still going on there ... that’s not safe for my recovery.... The last time I went back [to see her mother], I ended up completely forgetting about myself, my recovery. I didn’t think about taking care of myself.”

One of the ways some participants took care of themselves was by learning to channel their energy into positive rather than negative directions. For both Terry and Kameka writing was a way to deal with their emotions. For instance, Terry said that if she is

having a bad day or I am feeling in some kind of mood, I will sit down at night before I go to sleep and get everything I have, all my frustrations, I will write it all down. Because if I was in one of my moods,... and somebody came up to me and said the wrong thing, I’d probably not only physically hurt them, but I would hurt their feelings too. I don’t see the need for all that, so I write it all down. That way I can get it off my chest and it is not bothering me any more.

When she was 7, Kameka’s older brother taught her to write poetry as a way to deal with the anger and hurt created by her mother’s substance addiction and neglect. Later, Kameka developed other strategies for channeling her energy into positive directions. She said, “I started taking my anger and putting it into my school work,” and she became active in her church.

Nine of the 12 participants reported that the difficulties they had experienced had helped them learn what they wanted and didn’t want in life and the importance of personal goals. For instance, Drew said, “I definitely have more goals. There are definitely things I want to do . . .” and Wanda said “I realized that I wanted to do something with my life.” Clark’s brush with the legal system made him realize “what I want to do in life and know that I got to do certain things so I can accomplish my goals.” Similarly, participants indicated that certain experiences helped them learn what they did not want for their lives. For instance, experiences in jail or with the legal system made them realize they did not want to get in legal trouble again. Andy spoke to this learning very specifically when he said, “I went to jail for 5 days, and ever since then, I don’t want to be in trouble.... I know I can get in there, and now I don’t want to be in there.” Terry learned a similar lesson from her brush with the legal system: “I just basically realized that I didn’t want to stay in jail for the rest of my life. I did not want to make a career criminal out of myself, and that if I got out there and applied myself and tried, I could do better.”

### ***Learning About Being in Relationship with Others***

The second category of learning that participants found helped them navigate troubled waters was learning how to be more considerate, responsible, and careful in relationship to other people. This area of learning involved such lessons as taking responsibility for their own actions, learning to get along with others, learning to trust others and accept help, becoming better judges of character and avoiding bad influences, and helping others.

Taking responsibility for one’s own actions involved both developing more responsible attitudes and behaving more responsibly. Participants talked about the importance of learning to distinguish right from wrong, understanding that actions have consequences, and deciding to do the right thing. Seven of the 12 participants acknowledged that taking responsibility for their actions has been a major change for them. June explained how she learned to

look more on a situation and think about it before I was going to do it. Or, before I'd act upon it, think about, could this happen or could that happen or will it work itself out like this. Look at all angles of it before you go and try to do it ... I think I learned that if you live your life and don't do things right, you're going back [to jail] ... If you don't act right ... you're going to get in trouble and you're going to have to pay your consequences.... And if you're mature and responsible, you won't do those things.

Drew also associated learning to think about consequences with the concept of responsibility:

I learned to think a lot more about possible consequences of anything I do ... If I'd done that [DUI] with 3 or 4 other people in the car, it could have been other people hurt. If I wouldn't have hit a tree, it could have been a house. It could have been somebody walking their dog. It could have been another car. It literally makes me think a lot more about what any possible repercussions could be of anything that I do.

An important part of taking responsibility is learning to distinguish right from wrong and behaving accordingly. Clark spoke of this in a very general sense when he said, "Everything will be all right as long as I do what's right." However, other participants indicated very specific behaviors they had learned not to engage in. For instance, Drew said he learned not to drive while intoxicated, and Andy learned he should not drink at all. Terry and Trisha both learned they cannot use any type of substance. Yvonne, who was pregnant at the time of the interview, said she had learned not to have sex until she is married.

Seven participants found that learning how to get along better with others was important. Getting along with others includes taking other people into account and learning more effective ways to interact with others. Carrie talked about how she learned the importance of taking other people into account when she was stopped for DUI:

It was very embarrassing that I put people's life in danger.... When it comes to stuff like this you can't think about yourself. I mean you got to think about people that's around you. When you're driving down the road, you're not the only person that's in danger. [You have to] to think about other people around you and consider their feelings about things.

Trisha said she had to learn

how to care about people,... having relationships with people, having friendships with people, learning what society expects of me.... I'm still in the process of dealing with ... relationships with people, like learning not to lie, not to manipulate, and not to put up with it if other people do that to me. And not to be a doormat. The difference between what is abuse and what is not abuse. Learning ... what's acceptable, learning a lot about respect and honor.

Yvonne talked about the importance of attitude in getting along with others when she said, "the attitude I had when I was 15 years old, not being like that anymore, seeing other people's point of view, listening to their side, listening to their advice."

Several youth learned more effective ways to get along with their families. For instance, Drew said, "I've got a little bit more tolerance for my mom now ... I try to deal with things in a [more] adult [way], not [like] when I'd have temper tantrums or just ignore everything ... I can communicate better with my mom." Susan also believed that she and her parents learned a lot about how to communicate better with each other. She said that the counseling they received "taught us how to communicate with each other and to express our feeling and don't criticize each other's feelings."

Four participants said learning to trust and accept help from others was important. For instance, Yvonne recalled a time when she decided to do something different than she usually did with her anger:



I had gotten really angry at somebody for something they had done to me behind my back. And I was so angry I was going to literally beat the crap out of the person.... And I figure, no, maybe I'll just do something else first.

Instead, she called a hotline and talked to a counselor about how to confront the person without letting it "escalate into an argument." Other people looked to family or friends. For instance, Susan said that she had learned "to come to my parents a lot sooner," and Wanda said she had learned the importance of listening to other people. She said, "You have to listen to other people and hear what they did. You could refuse to listen. If you don't, it's your fault ... I caught myself in bad situations when I didn't listen and so I learned from my mistakes. I was like, this time, I'm going to listen."

Several participants had to learn to trust other people before they could accept help. Sometimes they came to trust professional helpers; sometimes it was family members in whom they rediscovered trust. Kameka's experience in the residential treatment center helped change her attitudes toward others: "When I got [to the group home], I learned that all people weren't bad, especially adults." Susan began to trust her parents as a result of the support she received from them during the trial of the man who raped her and during her subsequent miscarriage. She said, "I've learned that, no matter what the situation, that they're going to be there." As a result, she says that she has the best relationship she has ever had with her parents, and they continue to be a source of support for her in her current pregnancy.

While learning to trust was important, learning who not to trust was equally important. Six young people noted that their experiences had led them to become better judges of character and to avoid people who were bad influences on them. As Clark said, it's important to pick "my friends wisely.... Everybody you see and want to be your friend, they ain't really your friend. They just trying to get something out of you." June learned that "other people could be sincere and giving and under-standing and helpful. And at the same time, I learned they can be just the opposite." At the time of his DUI and injury from his wreck, Drew learned "who good friends of mine are. It helps to judge character a little bit more."

Learning to be a better judge of people frequently meant that participants learned to avoid bad influences. Generally, this meant avoiding people or situations that would tempt them to do things they should not do. Six participants indicated avoiding bad influences was an important lesson. Mandy "stopped running around" and spent more time at home rather than going out with friends with whom she might get into trouble. Yvonne said it was important to learn "not to give in to peer pressure," and Terry is not "going out and partying like I was every night. I am not drinking and I am not doing the drugs."

For Kameka, avoiding bad influences sometimes meant distancing herself from friends, including two girls who, along with her, had en-gaged in self-mutilation:

I loved both the girls ... to death. I love them to this day. We still keep in touch and everything. But we just don't do well together. And one of them now is very sick, and it's hard because now I feel like I have to distance myself from her ... I feel like if I sit there and listen, I know what's going to happen. She's going to pour it all out on me. I'm going to go home and get all depressing, not know what to do with myself and ... just blow up with that ... I know who I can't hang around and I know who I can. And being able to make those little decisions has helped me.

Four of the participants found that the process of helping others helped them through difficult times. For instance, Trisha said,

It gives me purpose.... All that comes from it is good. There's nothing negative about [it]. It's like you're helping yourself, you're helping the other person, and then you're giving the other person also the opportunity to help others. So it's like you're seeing this goodness multiply. That's just so cool.

Drew discovered the importance of helping others while in a treatment program that included civic and charitable activities. He emphasized the importance that such efforts be voluntary, however:

Just getting out and doing things, whether it was the recycling or the CROP walks or things like that, you know, it actually gives [an opportunity]. You know, not to force the kids to do that. Sometimes, I just, [it] gives you a little more sense of pride, and you know, you're helping out, you're doing something, and it's not being forced.

Kameka's desire to help others and the benefit of such altruism to her own life was evident when she talked about a friend she had met in the hospital:

She is still going down hill, and I tried to make her feel better. I try to help ... I take her bowling ... I took her to the beach this summer.... When I saw her running up and down that beach, I mean, it just made me so happy. For me to be able to take somebody and say, 'Hey, look, don't worry about the money. Don't worry about anything. Enjoy yourself.' I mean, that made me feel like I was doing something good for her and doing something good for myself at the same time.

Interestingly enough, several participants planned to go into helping professions such as teaching, psychology, counseling, and nursing. Terry summarized these sentiments when she said,

I plan to go to college and major in juvenile psychology or juvenile therapy or something like that ... I could offer other kids advice from someone who's pretty much been and done everything that they've been through ... I want to make a difference in a young person's life.

The youth we interviewed indicated they had learned many new attitudes and behaviors that helped them resolve crises and deal effectively with turning points in their lives. When we asked them how they were able to learn those new attitudes and behaviors, all 12 reported that they learned from experience. In addition, a few youth indicated they had also learned from the experiences of others (vicarious learning).

### *Learning from Experience*

All 12 research participants reported learning from their own mistakes and experiences. As Wanda said, "When you do something, you learn from your mistakes. I learned from my mistakes." Several of these young people noted that, for them, making such mistakes was unavoidable. For instance, Clark said, "I had to get in trouble." Terry elaborated on a similar theme:

I am just one of those people, I can't hear. And I just have to feel before I believe anything. I have to see it to believe it. If somebody tells me that the light's off, I won't believe them unless I come in here and see it.

For some young people, the learning process occurred very quickly, as a dramatic event made them wake up to the potential consequences of their actions. For instance, seven of the participants had been in legal trouble, and three had actually spent time in jail. For those who went to jail, the experience was a wake-up call, as evidenced by Terry's comments:

I learned a lot when I was in jail.... My life was about to flash before my eyes. I hadn't got an education; I hadn't got any goals set. I come to figure it out that I am an adult, and I have to start acting like an adult ... I don't think that I would have bypassed going to jail at that time. I would still be on cocaine. I would still be on the methamphetamines. I'd still be drinking. And honest to God, I think I probably would have been dead or really close to it. I think it's kind of a Godsend that I went to jail, and it sounds awful, but it really turned my life around.

For other youth, the learning process was more gradual, involving observation over time that the ways they

were handling certain situations were not working very well. For example, Yvonne's family argued a lot, and frequently these argument turned into fights. Yvonne said that over the years, she learned to "keep my mouth shut" if her siblings or parents were arguing with each other. She also learned to "hold my tongue" in arguments with her mother. She said that, over time, she learned, "If I got involved in something, then a bigger deal would be made out of it, and if I didn't get involved in it I found that it was much more easier to get along. So, eventually, I just stopped getting involved." Trisha summed up this perspective on gradual learning when she said, "I've been in recovery six years, and it's a continual process. And I'm not where I would like to be right now. It's going to be a lifetime thing."

### *Vicarious Learning*

While all 12 participants indicated they had learned from their own experiences, three youth also said that they had learned from the experiences and mistakes of other people, usually friends or family members. For instance, Carrie said that her relatives' addiction to alcohol and drugs and suicide attempts had a great impact on her:

I try to take less pills than I have to take. I mean the only pills I will even put in my mouth is aspirin or Tylenol, and I try not to take them because I'm so scared that [I might get] hooked or something. I never want to be in that position, so I'm going to try to keep myself away from it as I can ... I definitely want to live a different life than what they have. I feel like I live in a crazy family.

Both Wanda and Trisha believed they learned important lessons by comparing themselves with other people. Wanda said that seeing what happens to people who don't have much education spurred her on to finish high school and go on to college:

I realized what would happen to me if I didn't stay in school ... I realized that I wanted to do something with my life. I see people who ... have to work in fast food restaurants. They don't really have enough money to pay their bills. I don't want to be like that. I want to have enough money for everything, pay bills, then have some extra money left over.

The learning Trisha talked about was more positive, seeing other young people who were doing well as possible role models for herself:

At the treatment center ... being in an environment where I was surrounded by my peers. People who came from where I came had similar experiences.... When I first came in I would see how the girls were doing who had been in for awhile, and then I could see, "Oh, wow, they're better, so maybe I could get what they have. . . ." And so seeing that other people had gone before me and done it, it gave me hope that maybe I could do it.

One young man spontaneously volunteered the idea that young people can learn from the experiences of others, although he did not give a specific instance in which he had learned vicariously. Andy said, "If I knew somebody for a long time and then they went to jail for something that they did for a long time and then they got out, you could see how they act, and then how it changes them." Like Andy, Clark believes that young people can learn from observing the experiences of others. In fact, Clark recommends that young people who are headed for trouble be shown "what happens to people who do bad things ... Try to scare them."

### *Personal Attributes*

Some participants believed that they were able to successfully navigate troubled waters because they possessed certain personal attributes. They did not think of these attributes as things they had learned, but as qualities that enabled them to successfully cope with their difficulties. Clark described his most important personal attributes as his sense of independence, responsibility, and caring. He contrasted himself with a cousin who had been in and out of jail since age 16:

I care a lot about me and about others and about my family. And about how I'm going to be through life

after I get out of the house and I got to take responsibility for real, what I'm going to do. I can't just, like [my cousin is] 25, still staying with my grandma,... I just don't want to be like that. I don't want to be dependent on nobody cause I can do for myself. I'm young enough; I'm not old. I'm not a baby; I can do for myself. And so I choose to do for myself...

Kameka, who had cared for her younger brother from the time she was 8 years old until she left home, believed that her maturity was a key factor in her being admitted into an independent living component of a residential treatment center. She perceived herself as being maturer than other young people at the center, and believed the staff saw that maturity as evidence that she could be successful in the independent living program:

I've been mature because I've been grown for a long time, you know. Not in the age sense, but in the sense where when I was 12 or 13 I could survive on my own for long periods of time.... I don't think I've ever really been immature like some other people.

Two of the participants indicated that knowing they had to be strong for other people helped them to grow up or to help themselves in difficult situations. For instance, after Carrie was reunited with her family, her mother developed breast cancer, which Carrie indicated was a major turning point in her life. Carrie said, "I knew I had to be strong for her." Mandy, who had been doing drugs and was faced with the possibility of losing custody of her son, said she knew "that I had to take care of myself and [my son] ... I quit because [he] was more important to me than my drugs."

Although these young people did not associate personal attributes with learning experiences, it appears that these qualities of determination, independence, responsibility, and maturity were developed over a period of time in which they learned both the importance of manifesting these qualities in their lives and how to do so. Because we are trying to present participant perceptions rather than our own interpretations of their experiences, we are treating personal attributes as a conceptual dimension separate from learned attitudes and behaviors.

### *Spirituality*

Seven participants reported that their faith in God or a higher power was an important factor in creating success in their lives, although their concepts of spirituality varied. Some people believed they had experienced direct divine intervention in their lives. For some, active engagement with their higher power through prayer was important, regardless of whether their prayers were answered immediately. Even some youth who could not identify specific ways faith helped them through troubled times felt that it was important to believe in God and to have faith.

Sometimes youth believed that God had intervened directly in their lives to save them from themselves. For example, Terry said,

I believe that if it wasn't for the Lord, my behind would be dead ... there have been so many times when I've used massive amounts of heroin, massive amounts of cocaine through intravenous use, when there have been times that I should have died. And I hadn't. I really think by the grace of God I am not dead, and that He has a purpose for me, and that He is going to keep me here no matter how many times I try to kill myself. I tried to end my life, and He is not going to let me go that easy.

Carrie also believed that God had a direct role in turning her life around. She said, "I just thank God for stopping me before I [killed or injured someone while driving drunk], giving me strength. I do believe that if I had kept drinking I would have become an alcoholic." The spirituality component of Trisha's substance abuse treatment program was a critical factor in her recovery. She had not gone to church much as a child, but had been educated in a Christian school which she said

left me with the feeling that I was being judged ... this hateful awful God looking after me, and I didn't want that.... So in the treatment center, it was based around Native American spirituality and more like

getting in touch with nature, in touch with earth. And the concept of spirituality instead of religion, that's what really made me open my eyes and see different things and got kind of interested in life again.... I guess [it] just helped me to see how I was connected so I wasn't as isolated as I thought I was.

Not feeling judged by a higher power was also important to Kameka who said:

I didn't necessarily believe in God that everybody else believes in, but I always believed in a higher power. And for me, just being able to say that I know I'm [here] because of something greater than myself. What it is, I have no idea, but just being able to pray to something, you know, just say "Help me" to somebody.... And they ain't going to judge you, come down and slap you ...

Some participants distinguished between personal faith and prayer and active participation or attendance at church. For instance, Carrie worked on Sundays and was not able to go to church, but thought that

knowing God's there for me and that He might not answer my prayers right then and sit there and can talk to me and stuff, but I know that if I pray to him about something, then I know He's gonna be able to do what He can.

June, who prayed on a daily basis, did not go to church either. She said, "I don't think that to have a close relationship with God you have to go to church."

### **Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to explore how young people are able to make successful transitions to young adulthood after being homeless, running away, or otherwise leaving home prematurely. This article described young people's perceptions of how they were able to effect positive changes in their lives, independent of help they may have received from others. Youth perceived that learning important new attitudes and behaviors, especially with regard to understanding and appreciating themselves and developing better interpersonal attitudes and skills, was a crucial factor in their success. Some youth believed that certain personal attributes such as determination, maturity, and a sense of independence were important. For over half the youth interviewed, their relationship with a higher power was a significant factor in turning their lives around.

One of the most striking findings of this study is the importance youth gave to their own resources and personal power. In their work on resiliency among children, Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, and Pardo (1992) identified four important factors, all of which involved relationships with adults or with social supports. None of these factors were associated with strengths or resources within the children themselves. In the study on which we are reporting, young people acknowledged the help they received from others (Kurtz et al., in press), but they were also able to identify certain internal factors that were significant in achieving some measure of success in their lives.

One of the primary factors in successful transitions seems to be youths' ability to learn from their difficult experiences, including learning in relation to themselves. As they came to understand themselves better, including what was important to them, they also began to accept and value themselves in new ways. In the process, they developed more self-confidence and learned how to take better care of themselves, to take responsibility for their actions, to discriminate between people who were good and bad influences in their lives, to clarify what was important to them, and to trust potential helpers. They also learned specific skills for interacting with other people in more constructive ways.

Young people in this study indicated that recognizing their own value was an important first step in making significant changes. A strength-based approach to practice (Saleebey, 1992) with this population would seem to be most appropriate. However, such an approach is a major challenge within problem-oriented systems of care that identify young people by their criminal behavior, psychological disturbance, school performance problems, and forms of social dysfunction. One way that social workers can help young people begin to take this first



important step is to identify existing strengths and resources, both for the youth and for people who are involved with the youth. The assessment process should focus on strengths as well as on problems to be addressed. Social workers can then help youth build on and enhance existing resources and learn new approaches to problem solving and self-care behaviors.

An alternative to viewing runaway and homeless youth as dysfunctional is to recognize their life experiences that have prepared them to survive and, eventually, even to thrive. Such experiences may be conceptualized as meeting challenges presented by life rather than as evidence of social dysfunction. Rutter (1985) uses the term “steeling effects of stressors” (p. 600) to describe developmentally appropriate challenges that, when successfully met, prepare individuals to cope with future and more difficult challenges. Thus, rather than seeing runaway and homeless youth as victims or impaired in some way, social workers can help young people identify such “steeling qualities” within themselves, and to recognize and develop the qualities that will be of benefit to them in the future.

Although the process through which participants’ learning occurred varied somewhat, all youth reported that they had learned from their own experience. In fact, several participants indicated that was the only way they could learn certain hard lessons. Few youth reported significant vicarious learning, which may indicate that “Scared Straight” programs that expose youth to prison conditions, life on the street, or other potential negative consequences may be of limited value unless youth are directly at-risk for being incarcerated. Youth have to be able to see a real connection between potential consequences and their own lives. Unless they are able to make that connection, such consequences may have little meaning for them. An implication of this finding is that parents, social workers, and other professionals who work with at-risk youth must realize that, despite all the primary prevention measures at their disposal, some youth will have to learn through their own experience of making mistakes and getting into trouble. This phenomenon supports the need for early intervention programs that work with young people once they get into trouble, but without branding them as “troublemakers” or even worse.

The pace of learning differed both between and within individuals. Sometimes learning took place very quickly, almost as if a light bulb went on in their heads or as if they woke up one morning and experienced a major cognitive or affective shift. In general, this type of learning occurred when youth experienced a “wake-up call” such as an experience in jail or the threat of losing custody of a child. In these instances, youth usually reported an intense experience of fear that allowed them to project themselves into the future and imagine what their lives would be like if they did not make some changes. Thus, youth were able to make direct connections between their lives and potential consequences when their own experiences set the stage for behavioral shifts that set them on a more positive course. Sometimes learning took place more gradually, as youth reflected back over various experiences and came to the conclusion that certain types of attitudes and behaviors were not working for them. Learning for these youth was a developmental process during which there were periods of accelerated learning, and also periods in which readiness for learning may have been developing but was perhaps still in process. Among youth in this study, change was not a linear process, but one characterized by cycles of progress and regress.

Because of the unpredictable and somewhat fitful nature of this learning process, social workers may at times find working with run-away and homeless youth to be frustrating or discouraging. Although it may be difficult to recognize when learning or other change is happening, it is important that social workers maintain a focus on the possibilities for learning in any situation, whether in the present or the past. When helping youth address a current situation, social workers might focus on what can be learned from a poor decision or ineffective problem solving. In reflecting on the past, social workers can help youth reframe the meaning they attribute to seemingly negative experiences by helping them identify important learning.

Participants’ perceptions of the value of spirituality is also an important finding with implications for practice. Over half of the young people in this study indicated that a relationship with a higher power was a significant factor in turning their lives around. Yet, only one participant said that the treatment program she was involved

with addressed this issue. Social workers and other professionals who work with at-risk youth may well find that tapping into youths' religious and spiritual belief systems can be a valuable resource for helping them change destructive attitudes and behaviors. Exploring and working with spiritual beliefs, which may not be religious in a traditional sense, can be a way of tapping into a youth's existing resources.

The personal attributes, to which youth credited some of their success, may or may not be learned during the process of struggling with the issues that resulted in their running away or becoming homeless. Certain of these attributes, such as independence, determination, and maturity, may have been developed prior to the situation that resulted in the youth leaving home. On the other hand, it is possible that these attributes were developed or further enhanced in that process as well. Certainly, these attributes are learned, and regardless of when they are learned, youths' perception of their importance means that social work intervention with runaway and homeless youth should facilitate development or enhancement of these characteristics.

The nature of the learning youth reported, the learning processes they experienced, and the personal attributes they believed to be important in turning their lives around, all have certain implications for programs designed to assist runaway and homeless youth or youth who are at-risk. Early intervention programs should include components that facilitate some of the learning the participants in this study have found beneficial, e.g., learning about themselves and their relationships with others. This type of learning has to take place within an environment that holds youth accountable for their actions but does not communicate negative judgments of them as people. Such programs must also take into account the fact that youth learn at different paces. Short-term programs that focus on very specific skills or attitudes may not make much difference in the lives of young people if they do not see the relevance to their lives. An individualized approach to working with at-risk youth would identify areas in which they are ready to grow and learn, and then target those areas with interventions.

Because this is an exploratory study utilizing a small purposive sample of participants, caution must be exercised in applying these findings to work with the larger population of runaway and homeless youth. According to Krefting (1991), generalizability of qualitative research findings is best conceptualized as "transferability" or the extent to which "findings fit into contexts outside of the study situation that are determined by the degree of similarity or goodness of fit between the two contexts" (p. 216). It is the researcher's responsibility to present findings in such a way that readers can decide for themselves how "transferable" the findings are to other situations in which they might apply such knowledge. One strategy for enhancing the transferability of qualitative findings is use of a sample of participants who have been nominated by key informants, that is, people who are in a position to know the extent to which a participant is typical or atypical of others in similar situations (Krefting, 1991). In this study, key informants in youth shelters and group homes nominated participants, based on criteria determined by researchers. Future research will be needed to determine the extent to which the perceptions and experiences of these 12 young people represent those of the youth runaway and homeless population at large.

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